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ENGLISH LITERATURE FOR SOPHOMORES¹

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Since the field of English literature is so broad that it can be known in its entirety by any individual only as details are catalogued in chronological order, the custom has arisen in American colleges of requiring a historical survey course as a prerequisite to further literary study. Teachers of literature feel the necessity of acquiring for themselves a thorough knowledge of chronology, and so hastily infer that their students also must secure an intimate acquaintance with dates of periods and publications and authors' lives, even if they should never possess such familiarity with the literature itself as would make a study of chronology desirable. Thus the natural method of learning first to know and love the material that may later need to be mentally catalogued has been replaced by the method of studying the catalogue as if it were of greater importance than the material. This has led to an emphasis upon the memorization of dates, facts of biography, social conditions, relationship between authors, and evolution of literary types *chronologically* considered.

Such a course is fitted only for the mind of a student who has the ambition of the scholar; who is so eager to acquire knowledge for its own sake that he has developed an introspective interest in the *process* of registering and subjecting to comparison with others each new fact he learns. With an appreciation of the value of a system of association by means of which he can render his memory more certain and his thinking more logical, the scholar is capable of enthusiasms which are incomprehensible to a simpler mind. Therefore, when the scholar attempts to teach that simpler mind, it is easy for him to grow impatient and to expect more than is reasonable. Unfortunately, much of this over-expectancy is revealed

¹ A paper read before the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English in Chicago, November 27, 1914.

in the methods used by many instructors who conduct the survey course in English literature required by most colleges.

The problem of teaching literature in college is mainly a problem of the second year. In general, the introductory course is given to Sophomores in 77 per cent and to Freshmen in 20 per cent of American colleges.¹ Now it may be possible to help Sophomores toward the attainment of the scholar's point of view, but it is wrong to assume at the beginning of the academic year that any large number have already acquired the habits of the scholar. Nevertheless, there is a tendency among educators to overestimate the Sophomore's intellectual independence and resourcefulness. They tacitly rank him with upper classmen, and too often credit him with a mental grasp but slightly inferior to that of the Junior. In reality there is much of the preparatory-school student left in the Sophomore. He should be regarded, not as a little less than the Junior, but as only a little more than the Freshman. In some respects he is really inferior to the Freshman. Complaints are made that Sophomores do not show the spontaneous enthusiasm for learning common to Freshmen, that they are harder to move, and more inclined to discount the value of an intellectually spent college course—in short, that they have come under the inevitable influence of college opinion which puts a premium on activities outside of the curriculum. Whatever the cause, it is often true that Sophomores are more indifferent to things of the intellect and heart than are Juniors, Seniors, or Freshmen. It is frequently said of many college men that "they did not wake up until Junior year."

Such, then, is the average Sophomore, the student in college who is most in need of sympathetic treatment, and who nevertheless usually receives least attention from the faculty. Freshmen are led to an intellectual training-table and are carefully fed according to the theory that anything but predigested food will be too heavy for their mental stomachs. On the other hand, instructors of the three upper classes seem to have forgotten approved pedagogical methods, and proceed on the principle that the best

¹ The statistics in this article are compiled from the announcements of courses of instruction in the catalogues (1913) of one hundred leading colleges and universities.

way to help a youth to develop is to give him the opportunity of cramming himself with all the knowledge he can hold. Most Juniors and practically all Seniors are mature enough to derive considerable benefit from the lectures of professors who deliver their utterances with an indifferent "take or leave" attitude, but the Sophomore is not able to assimilate without guidance a mass of knowledge for which the only recommendation to him is that it is interesting to someone else. This fact is often overlooked, for it is a prevalent notion that the transition from high-school to college methods of study is completely achieved in the Freshman year. Sophomore year, however, is a year of transition from studies which for many students are merely a repetition or rounding up of preparatory-school work, to studies like philosophy, political economy, and sociology, which constitute the prime essentials in the preparation for modern leadership in thought and civic activity. More of the vital social problems which are customarily first presented through the medium of Junior studies and which are so tremendously stimulating that their appearance in their present place in the curriculum has given rise to the saying, "Junior year is the best year in college," should be brought to the attention of the Sophomore.¹ Then he would find a value in his daily studies which they now seldom seem to possess.

The survey course in the history of English literature often fails to arouse an interest in that history. Worse still it frequently fails to inspire a love for literature itself. One difficulty is that instructors think themselves justified in presenting material simply because they believe their students ought to know it. It is true that a college man should be informed, but the place to inform him is not in the introductory literature course.² As soon as college English teaching becomes informational it loses vision and true purpose. This fact is being widely recognized but, nevertheless, another fact remains, that, while much time and energy is given to the writing of textbooks for Freshmen, too little is expended in

¹ In Amherst College the attempt is being made to present philosophy (logic and ethics) to Sophomores.

² "La littérature n'est pas objet de savoir: elle est exercice, goût, plaisir. On ne la *sait* pas, on ne l'*apprend* pas; on la pratique, on la cultive, on l'aime."—Gustave Lanson in the *Avant-propos* of his *Histoire de la littérature française*, 1906.

thoughtful planning for the presentation of literature to the Sophomore. The recent publication of a half-dozen histories of literature and a few anthologies has indicated a growing consciousness of the need of some adequate solution of what is now the greatest problem in the English department. How shall the study of literature be made vital to the Sophomore?

The problem presents two important considerations, one administrative, growing out of the prevalence of the survey course and the place it occupies in the curriculum, and the other pedagogical, determining what the nature of the course should be as suggested by the variations in methods of teaching it in different colleges. Of the catalogues of one hundred institutions of higher learning, only seventy-seven announce¹ the course, but in one respect this statement is misleading, for in twenty-two of the twenty-three colleges supposedly not giving the survey, some course or courses almost its equivalent are given. In seven of the twenty-three, the survey is extended over two or three courses in Sophomore, Junior, and Senior years; in others, a choice is given in alternate years between American literature and the survey course; in several, the field of literary history is covered by a study of poetry the first semester and prose the second, or vice versa; in Oberlin and Yale "selected masterpieces" are read—masterpieces chosen from all the principal periods of English literary history. In only one of the one hundred colleges is there no course which could in any way be called a substitute for the survey, and that one college has over five hundred students, with only one member of the faculty in the English department. The survey course, or its equivalent, is almost universal.

There are two classes of students for which the survey course is expected to provide. In technical schools very largely, and in colleges of liberal arts to a certain extent, there are students who,

¹ In the cases of fifty-two institutions, concerning which the information was available, the survey course is *required* in thirty-five colleges; it is *elective* in ten colleges; in one it is *required* in a preparatory department; in five it is simply announced as *prerequisite* to all further literature courses; and in one, all students are *advised* to take it before pursuing further literature study.

Of sixty-two colleges, 12 give the survey course in the first year; 47 in the second year; two in the third year; one in the fourth year.

after the one year of the survey course, make no further study of literature. Another class of students take the historical survey as an introduction to a more intensive investigation of periods and authors in Junior and Senior years. But a tabulation of the information in regard to technical schools and large state universities, as well as of that concerning small colleges of liberal arts and women's colleges, shows that both classes of students are with almost equal uniformity required to take the survey course.¹ Thus it appears that the consideration as to whether students are to continue their study of literature under instruction in college, or after college on their own initiative, has had little or no effect upon the prevalence of the course, or upon the extent to which it is either elective or required.

Statistics offer no suggestions to the administrator. In some institutions it may possibly be found practicable to allow those students who elect to study English during Junior and Senior years to pursue in place of the survey some other literature course. But any such problem of administration must be solved by experimentation.

According to present practice the real purpose of the course, whether it be ostensibly to prepare for a further and more intensive classroom study of literature or to furnish all that is deemed indispensable to the educated man's mental equipment, is to lay the foundation for an intelligent appreciation of the literature with which the student may later become acquainted, whether before or after graduation. There are striking differences between the survey courses in various colleges, but these differences result not at all from the theoretical needs of students who will or will not specialize in literature, but from contrasting pedagogical theories held by instructors.

While the prevalence of the survey course, its place in the curriculum, and its primary purpose are practically uniform throughout the country, the methods by which instructors are seeking to accomplish that purpose *have* been affected by special problems in many institutions and by various pedagogical points

¹ A slightly larger proportion of technical schools than of other institutions *require* the survey course.

of view. Thus the pieces of literature selected for reading are often chosen with regard to the courses given in later years, where it is known that the students will do further work in the English department. This adaptation of material to the peculiar conditions obtaining in each of many institutions tends toward variety. For example, it was ascertained that out of thirty-one colleges seven begin their study with Chaucer, probably because in each case a course in Anglo-Saxon literature is presented to upper classmen. One college begins its survey with Milton, because Anglo-Saxon literature, Chaucer, and the Elizabethan period are carefully studied in Junior and Senior years. But the large majority, twenty-four colleges out of the thirty-one, begin their survey with *Beowulf*. This practice is general because of the widespread belief in the necessity of chronology as a preparation for literary appreciation.

There are two theories which are widely held as to the literature to be studied by beginners. Some theorists advocate that of the nineteenth century as most immediate and therefore most interesting to modern youth. But the advantages weigh heavily on the side of a survey course of the whole field, because it furnishes the broadest foundation for all future study; because every great work reveals indebtedness to the literature of preceding centuries, and therefore cannot be fully appreciated by a reader lacking knowledge of the past; and because an understanding of literary types is best gained through an investigation of the conditions incident to their first appearance. Only where English study is required throughout the four years of college could some combinations of courses on separate periods be satisfactorily substituted for the survey. Even then, however, Victorian literature should be reserved until the last year, for it is more reasonable to expect Seniors rather than Sophomores to evince an enthusiastic interest in the strenuous intellectuality of Carlyle, the sinuosities of Browning's thought, and the stylistic subtleties of such writers as Pater and Swinburne. Nineteenth-century literature does not offer beginners the best field for study because in it the most advanced and complex technical devices are employed.

The value of an investigation of the survey course lies in the suggestions it gives as to what the course should be, and how and how not it should be conducted. The catalogue of Colgate University requires of all Sophomores a "Historical Introduction" course of which the announced purpose is to provide a "knowledge of historical developments in literature; acquaintance with periods, types, and authors; understanding of the principles of literary criticism and of the laws that underlie the various forms of literary art; and knowledge of the origin and development of the English language." This is a conventional statement of the aims of the survey course in most colleges. In contrast to it, the catalogue of Beloit College gives a course for Freshmen, prerequisite to advanced courses, called an "Introduction to the Study of Literature," with the following interesting announcement: "This is not a survey course or a study of history. Selected pieces are carefully studied (1) to arouse a realization of the worth of literature, (2) for the forms and matter of representative works (3) to assist to a notion of the chief characteristics of the greater classes of literature." The first sentence of this announcement shows a recently acquired distrust of the value of chronology in literary study.

The last year's catalogue of an eastern college makes one feel that its survey course was far from being what it should. Happily there has since been a radical change. Lectures were given by the instructor and "these lectures are reproduced by the students in both recitation and examination." In contrast to this unproductive reproductive process, one reads in the catalogue of Drake University that "the poets from Milton to Tennyson are studied as interpreters of life. There is an effort made to present the technical phases of the work of the poets as significant of the inner spiritual thought of the world." Another course in Drake University, supplementary to this and less pretentious, entitled "The Development of English Thought," is a study of prose, and in it, "philosophical, sociological, and aesthetic questions" are discussed.

The examples of the four colleges just given show that there is a tendency toward substituting for the strictly historical survey an "introduction to literary appreciation." The course in Creighton University is unique, so far as one can tell from the meager

information furnished by catalogues. (The course in Yale is apparently somewhat like it.) It gives an introduction to literary appreciation, but also retains a study of history. The announcement reads: "Precepts; Poetics (types); Fiction; Texts for Study: Newman's Lecture on Literature, and Essay on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Selections from Newman, Ruskin, De Quincey, Milton, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, De Vere. History up to the Classical Age." This course is too individual to merit general acceptance, but many colleges are in practice doing very much what Creighton University announces itself as doing. More and more colleges are subordinating history, though not discarding it altogether, to a study of the meaning of literature.

It is true that Beloit College has dispensed with the historical survey instead of merely subordinating it to an appreciative study of representative works. It would appear, however, that the law of the pendulum is responsible for this complete rejection of literary history. But must both extremes in a matter of human action always be reached before the perfect balance can be realized? Can we not be wise enough to hold the pendulum when for the first time it is on the point of swinging past its normal position? Will it not be possible for English instructors to cease placing too much emphasis upon chronology without going so far as to abandon all chronology whatsoever?

The announcement of Swarthmore College suggests what seems to be an almost ideal course for the first year of college literature study, prerequisite to all other courses: "*First semester*.—Lyric and narrative poetry, the drama, novel, essay. Lectures on versification—few fundamental principles of literary criticism. *Second semester*.—Rapid survey—Anglo-Saxon to Victorian literature." Here as in Cornell College, Iowa, lectures on the "foundations of literature" precede a chronological study.

It would be impossible to outline in minute detail a course equally valuable to all colleges. No arbitrary list of authors and books for collateral reading and classroom discussion would give universal satisfaction. Each instructor must make his own selection to fit the needs of particular students. But there are several things which general enlightened opinion must concede to be

essential. These things, placed in the most effective order may serve as an outline for the best introductory and survey course.

Students should understand, first of all, what literature is, what it should mean to them, and how they can test the value of the selections read. They should have an appreciation of the limitations and possibilities of literary types, and also an understanding of the connection between literature and biography, literature and history, and literature and the spirit of man. Concretely, in the first semester students should be prepared for the work of the second semester, when applications of the principles learned in the first semester are to be made to their reading. *Beowulf* furnishes a basis for the study of the *epic* as a type, and for an understanding of the way in which the life of a people is revealed in literature. The *ballad* as a type; the mediaeval romance and Chaucer's *Tales* as representative of the *romance*; Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and Spenser's *Fairie Queen* as *combinations of the epic and romance*; and *Paradise Lost* as the type of the *literary epic* present what appears to be a most convenient and interesting approach to the study of types, periods, and biography. An uninterrupted study of the *lyric*, including Spenser's and Milton's minor poems and the Elizabethan love songs, elegies, and sonnets, and the odes of Cowley and Dryden, might follow, with a consecutive study of the rise and development of the *drama* immediately thereafter. (The drama is thus treated chronologically and consecutively in Long's, Symond's, and Crawshaw's history texts.) Roughly speaking, the course thus far will have considered *every important poetic type* and all the more important authors and works up to the Restoration. A brief study of *prose* should follow, prose from its beginnings through a study of the elaborately rhythmized prose of the seventeenth century and the unelaborated rhythm of balance in verse and prose in the *classical couplet* and eighteenth-century *essay*. The rise of the *novel* should conclude this study. At the end of the first semester students should be expected to know periods only in large outline, but *all types of literature except the short-story* in detail.

Dates and facts of literary history should be sparingly memorized, but the *process* of arranging knowledge in chronological order

can be made of great value. The catalogue of Fisk University makes a most suggestive announcement: "Of the required written work in the survey course the most important is the presentation of the development of literature in tabulated form." The most important single assignment of the year should be a carefully made and complete outline of the literature studied during the first semester. Because they have studied types rather than periods, students will be compelled to rearrange the order of material in their notes and, for example, place a Cavalier poem, a late Jacobean drama, and an early seventeenth-century prose work side by side. This assignment does not exactly "draw order out of chaos," for the students' notes will already have been well arranged, but it teaches chronology in the only way one ought ever to be expected to learn it. The value of a ready-made printed outline is enjoyed exclusively by the man who prepared it for sale.

The second semester could well start with the rise of romanticism and should stress early nineteenth-century literature. Subject-matter ought to be emphasized above manner. In the beginning ideas—political, sociological, and philosophical—should be drawn from the literature. Not until near the end of the year would it seem advisable to give any extensive discussion to aesthetics and refinements in technique, for the average American student is more susceptible to the appeal of truth than of beauty. Some hold this to be of sufficient reason why the very opposite thing ought to be done. But while the ultimate aim of our teaching is indeed to develop appreciation for art, it is good pedagogy to begin at the point where student interest will most readily respond.

Only authors of the first and second rank should be considered, unless the speed with which the class can move will permit some attention to names of minor importance. Students should be expected to know the history only of what is studied in the course, and not of authors and books merely mentioned by name in classroom or textbook.

As to general method, frequent classroom discussions and analyses of masterpieces are more desirable than many lectures. Lectures can do little else than retail the material which students might acquire directly from the best books of criticism. The

argument, however, is not that many lectures are unnecessary, but that students should have no ready-made criticisms set before them. *Only such information should be presented by means of lecture or textbook as is absolutely necessary to an appreciation of the literature itself, and no information should be thereby presented¹ which the student could glean for himself from a thoughtful reading of the literature under the stimulus of suggestive questions.* In the survey course, literature should be the textbook,² while critical opinions should as far as possible be the product of each student's reflection on what he has read. Thus he should follow the course pursued by every literary critic, which is first to become acquainted with the literature itself, and then, having thought for himself, to make a statement of his own impressions. The value will not lie in the correctness or astuteness of the opinions expressed, but in the fact that in order to express himself at all he has had to think. If the student uses as a textbook a *history* of literature which tells him what he ought to think of each author, his originality is hampered. But if, for example, when studying Wordsworth he is not asked to read a criticism of the poet's nature-doctrine, but is asked to read *Tintern Abbey* and discover four or five influences which Wordsworth claims to receive through nature, he will be forced to exercise judgment and not memory. He will grow in proportion to the effort of reasoning he puts forth. The growth desired in college does not come by addition to a student's stock of knowledge but by improvement in the quality of his thinking.

The ability to think is more important than acquaintance with literature. This is a very unorthodox position for the English teacher to assume. It is great heresy for him to confess that anything is more important than literature. Will he deserve excommunication, however, as long as he holds the belief that literature, with the one exception of philosophy, is the subject which offers the greatest opportunity to him who seeks to stimulate and guide college students in their thinking? Is it a desertion of his colors

¹ Gustave Lanson says of his *Histoire de la littérature française*, "Je voudrais donc que cet ouvrage ne fournit pas une dispense de lire les œuvres originales, mais une raison de les lire, qu'il éveillât les curiosités lieu de les éteindre."

² "Aller au texte, rejeter la glose et la commentaire."—Gustave Lanson.

for him to acknowledge that literature has no sovereignty of its own and that it deserves a place in the curriculum only as it subserves the purpose of the college? The mental and spiritual processes of our students, which it is the business of literature to promote, are the processes of life itself. Literature is merely one form of expressing these processes. The ability to think, therefore, *is* more important than acquaintance with literature. If the instructor makes this fact the basis of his theory of teaching, and makes his students see that he does, he will never be obliged to enter into conflict with the popular notion that literature is impractical. If the study of it is primarily directed toward the development of independent thinking, even those by whom it has previously been despised may be led to approach it with enthusiasm as something that will be of direct practical value every day of their lives. If the general introductory course contributes largely to the accomplishment of the real business of college—that is, to the increase of the power of thinking rather than to the informing of students' minds—the study of English literature will be vital to the Sophomore.

Can it mean much to a student to be told that literature is the most effective expression of human life, if he fails to find in it an expression of his own life? A man is naturally most interested in his individual problems, and has little eagerness to read the statement and attempted solution of problems which have not as yet entered into his own experience. Appreciation of Carlyle or Keats demands that one must first have had the thoughts and emotions which Carlyle or Keats has expressed. One must literally become a Shakespeare in intellect, imagination, and sympathy before one can, in the full sense of the word, *read* Shakespeare's plays. Therefore the primary duty of the professor in the Shakespeare course is to assist in the process of this becoming. The writings of genius, without the elucidation which can be given them by one who has previously studied them carefully, seldom stir a beginner to the degree of intellectual and emotional activity which is necessary to complete appreciation. The literature teacher's usefulness, his only excuse for being, becomes apparent when he succeeds in quickening his students' minds so that they can appreciate an

artist's work, not as a mere expression of someone else's thought, but as an expression of their own thought. One never fully appreciates a piece of literature until one can say of it, "I feel that I might have written this." All intensification of the reader's mental and spiritual processes should have as its aim such realization of a sense of capacity equal to the author's. Growth in ability to think is the thing which the literature course should serve to promote, because it is the only process by which appreciation becomes possible. The proper study of literature necessitates a development of the right kind of thinking.